
RECOLLECTIONS 1928-1939

by Tony MacMahon

When the Irish Free State was still striving to recover from the effects of the War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War the economy of the new state had to be replanned. Native industry was on a very limited scale so that the only major export was agricultural produce. There were, however, some traditional industries in Limerick such as the four bacon factories, Tait's Clothing Factory, Russell's and Bannantyne's flour and grain mills, two timber mills and Cleeve's Condensed Milk Company at Lansdowne.

These industries absorbed some of the unskilled labour available in the city, but the Docks gave substantial casual employment as imports were on a very large scale: flour and Spiller & Baker Birkenhead, Portlant cement, Welsh and English coal, Tate & Lyle's sugar and timber from Scandanavia and Canada. Under the term 'sundries' came practically every other commodity for trade or domestic use.

Dockers usually came from the poorer areas of the city - Carey's Road, Boherbuoy, Parnell Street, Mungret Lane, Nicholas Street, Arthur's Quay and the Windmill. The Dock gates were opened at seven o'clock in the morning. At about a quarter past seven, the dockers would begin to gather at the gate nearest to the cargo boat. The stevedore came at about half past seven and then the men gathered around in a semi-circle inside the gate. The stevedore began his selection, picking here and there according to his own experience and judgement but often according to his personal likes and dislikes. The number to be employed depended on the holds to be worked that day. This usually would be a hold at the 'fore' and another at the 'aft'. The men then went to the boatside - those selected. The rejected ones drifted out the Dock gates. Their labour had been offered in vain; no one wanted their hire and now they faced home "reeling with want and worn with scars" and the nagging thought of facing home to the family hopeless and penniless.

Back at the Docks, the lucky ones commenced work at eight o'clock. The cargoes could consist of flour, grain or meal, cement, coal, sugar, timber or sundries. Work had to go on in all kinds of weather. There was no "Wet Time" insurance then.

The men's clothing was scanty - thread-bare coats, patched pants and peakcaps. Some wore soldiers' khaki tunics indicating army service in the First World War, but the brass but-

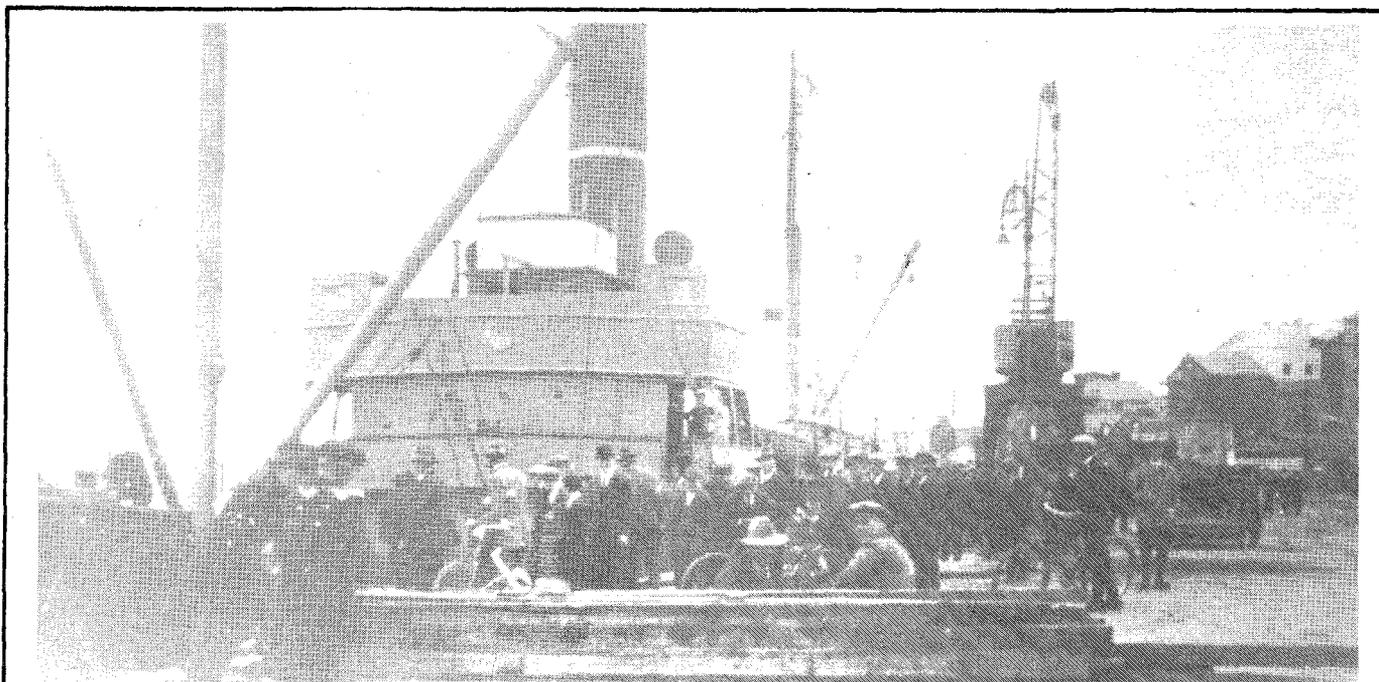
tons of the tunics no longer glistened with daily polishing and were now lustreless and unnoticed, like the dull eyes of their wearers who had been given the empty promise of coming home to a land fit for heroes.

In bad weather or for dirty work the most effective covering for a worker was a jute sack suitably folded at one corner to make a hood for the head and a shelter for the shoulders and back.

The docker had come that morning without breaking his fast, so when the wife or mother did not see him return idle at about nine o'clock, a breakfast was prepared. The meal was easy to make - scalding tea in a caddy tightly wrapped round with an old woolen sock to keep the heat in. The food was just a few cuts of cottage loaf spread with dripping. The simple meal was brought speedily to the Docks, arriving around ten o'clock. The mealtime was unofficial and so was finished within fifteen minutes, and then it was back to the boatside where work was going on all the time. The job was hard - bags of sugar, cement or flour carried on the back from the platform to the storage shed was the usual order of the day. Noise and dust pervaded everywhere.

But at noon a welcome silence reigned at the boatside when the Angelus bell rang out from the tower at the "Holy Fathers", Mount St. Alphonsus. The donkey engines ground to a halt and often a hoist of bagstuff could be seen swaying in the sling high in the air over the openhold. All was quiet as the men prayed for a short time - peace and rest - and then once again the work started up with its incessant noise and suffocating dust.

Meantime, back at home, a simple dinner was being prepared. The diet of the unemployed was usually tea and bread spread with dripping three times each day. It was unknown to have ready money for a more substantial or nourishing meal, so recourse to a pawn office was necessary when the man started work. Some article - war medal, trinket, clothing and even 'the shawl' was pledged, but wedding rings



Timber for the Shannon Scheme being unloaded at the Limerick Docks on September 9, 1925.

were seldom pawned. Pawn offices were situated in the poorer parts of the city - Parnell Street, High Street, Irishtown and Englishtown.

Dinner break was from one to two o'clock. Some men went home for the meal, but for those who did not dinner was brought to the Docks in a covered basket or tin can tucked snugly under the shawl.

The men were paid off from the "tally box" each evening at five o'clock. The day's pay was thirteen shillings. The stevedore stood by to identify the men to the payclerk, as they often were very different looking men to those recruited that morning. They could be covered with coal dust, cement or flour, but the next morning, they turned up at the Dock gates again, dusted and cleansed, hoping for another day's work. The selection and rejection began once more, as impoverished families prayed hopefully at home.

Many people then were poor and undernourished, and dependence on neighbours was necessary. In the neighbourhood there was no 'side' and no 'tuppence ha'penny looking down on tuppence'. If a shawl had to be pawned, a neighbour would lend hers for Sunday Mass or an urgent message. There was nothing much to hide - everyone was poor and often penniless. But there was a sensitivity, respect and un-conscious dignity among neighbours. For instance, if one of the family was born mentally defective, it was 'duine le Dia' or 'God's child'. If there was a person in a family in the 'decline', they were spoken of as 'delicate' and the family's reticence respected. T.B. was only spoken about openly when the state began the scheme of benefits to persons suffering from infectious diseases.

Poverty has a bonding power which is released by sharing; everyone in the neighbourhood understood it because everyone experienced it. People were kinder among themselves. As our Irish proverb says: "Ar scath a cheile a mhairid na daoine". (People live under the shelter of each other). The main sources of income for the unemployed were Home Assistance and help in cash or kind from the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Home Assistance in some places was on a barely survival level. It was based on the old Poor Law code of the nineteenth century and was still just sufficient to keep the recipient and his dependants out of the 'Poor House'. The rule had not changed in a hundred years.

While the gap between rich and poor was wide and still widening in the nineteen twenties, there was no visible protest - no explosion or Marxist revolution. The Irish people had safety valves - the national haemorrhage of emigration and the simple faith. The Church is the Church of the small and poor, but in Limerick it had never been stressed that God and evil are enemies and that material poverty and sickness are evils. Conditions were accepted in a docile manner because it was felt and believed that one may not expect happiness on this side of the grave, but may hope that there would be a reward awaiting in a joyful eternity hereafter.

Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical, **The Condition of the Working Classes** declared that: "It is a sacred law of nature that a father should provide food and all necessaries for his family. Similarly, it is natural that he should wish that his children who carry on, so to speak, and continue his personality, should be by him provided with all that is needful to enable them to keep themselves decently from want and misery." In Limerick, this pronouncement seemed to be unknown and was never effectively preached.

But the people themselves did their best in bringing up their families. Children in the neighbourhood were cherished and sheltered. The extended family and neighbours cared for and protected the children. It was a case of living between the homes of neighbours in safety and being minded as if the child were at home. Just like a young planted tree surrounded by protective railing, as one would see in the People's Park.

Slums and tenements considered unfit for human habitation were cleared in the early 'thirties when a scheme of three hundred houses was completed in the Island Field. Families in the insanitary dwellings in the areas of Parnell Street, Mungret Street, John Street, Broad Street and Nicholas Street were

given tenancies in the new houses. But the housing authority made a sad and inhuman mistake in the allotment of the individual houses. The neighbourhood spirit of family groups was not appreciated. House numbers were 'picked from a hat' and so life-long neighbours were scattered from one end of the scheme to the other - isolated from close friends. This 'lucky dip' draw was democratic but its end result was the break-up of the old closely-knit communities.

An unusual and puzzling matter arose within a year after the tenants took up occupation in the Island Field scheme. The City Medical Officer reported a surprisingly high incidence of deaths in the new estate. Medical and social reasons were given, but some of the tenants could only conclude that the people concerned had 'died of fresh air'.

The casual labourers who looked to the Docks for their scant livelihood became more impoverished in the early 'thirties when shipping in Limerick Port, as well as in other Irish ports, fell off drastically because of the 'Economic War' between Britain and the Irish Free State. The British government put an embargo on trade with this country and the Irish government retaliated. As a result, the dockers had a very lean time with only monthly or quarterly cargo boats from Antwerp or Hamburg arriving in the port.

In the early part of the 'thirties, the government introduced Unemployment Assistance ('the Dole'). This provided a weekly payment, again at a mere subsistence rate, for an eligible adult who was fit for work, available for work and unable to get it. Allowances were also given for dependants of the applicant. A parish priest in West Cork at the time declared that the "Dole" would be the downfall of the Irish people", but for the poor and undernourished it was a 'Godsend'.

During the Economic War, because of the embargo, there was a huge surplus of cattle in the country. The government decided to use part of this surplus to give free beef to the unemployed. This was done by way of a voucher for so many pounds of beef, depending on the number of dependants of the recipient. But there was a complete misunderstanding on the part of the central government. People on the Dole had neither the equipment nor condiments for cooking beef nor the cash to buy them, being forced to exist on a subsistence diet of tea and bread. So, many a food voucher was bartered for some other food or article, and many a greyhound breeder fed the free beef to his dogs. Shades of the great Famine in the 1840s.

In the early 'thirties there was no general plan for the development of native industry in the state apart from the increased generation of electricity from the Shannon Scheme and the growing constructions of new houses throughout the country. But, generally, work was not available so the state decided to finance a national Unemployment Relief Scheme to be operated by local authorities. In Limerick city, the scheme was controlled by the Corporation and mainly consisted of roadmaking and road restoration works. The regulations for employment were laid down by the Department of Local Government and provided that the men should be recruited from lists drawn up by the local Employment Exchange. Each group of men was given four weeks' work and then 'let go' to be replaced by another group from another list from the Employment Exchange. The works were carried out in the autumn and winter of each year and continued until the annual allocation of funds by the Department was spent. A strange but realistic provision in the small print of the regulations governing the schemes suggested that the men recruited should not be given heavy work in the first week or so, when they would have been unable to perform such a task because of their impoverished condition. But the unusual admission and good intention of the Department remained only a pious dream because just as the men were getting on their feet to feed their families and themselves, they were 'let go' to subsist for another year, at least, on the Dole. More widespread poverty would have been experienced, but for our most precious and expensive export on the emigration ship to England and the U.S.A. Thousands of young men and women left, and the numbers emigrating grew each year even during the period of the Second World War which broke out in 1939.